DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 248 CS 010 170

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TITLE The Uses of Newspapers by Elderly Audiences.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (73rd, Minneapolis, MN, August 1-4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aging (Individuals); Audience Analysis; *Mass Media Use; Media Research; *Newspapers; *Older Adults; Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; *Reading Interests; Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS Reading Behavior; Reading Uses

ABSTRACT

A study examined uses of newspapers by elderly persons, with emphasis given to the extent to which exposure and gratification patterns change by age segments within the aged, and what kinds of factors are associated with such changes. Data from a national sample of 1,308 elderly persons indicated that readership varies more by demographic and personal factors for those in their 60s than for older groups, and that readership declines among those 80 and over. Gratifications appeared more closely tied to exposure for the "older old" (those over 80), however, suggesting more purposive readership. (Four tables of data are included, and 31 references and an appendix on measures are attached.) (Author/SR)

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THE USES OF NEWSPAPERS BY ELDERLY AUDIENCES

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Presented to

Newspaper Division
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Annual Convention

Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 1990

CS010170

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ABSTRACT

THE USES OF NEWSPAPERS AMONG ELDERLY AUDIENCES

Uses of newspapers by elderly persons are examined, with emphasis given to the extent to which exposure and gratification patterns change by age segments within the aged, and what kinds of factors are associated with such changes. Data from a national sample of 1,308 elderly persons indicate that readership varies more by demographic and personal factors for those in their 60s than for older groups, and that readership declines among those 80 and over. Gratifications appear more closely tied to exposure for the older old, however, suggesting more purposive readership.

THE USES OF NEWSPAPERS BY ELDERLY AUDIENCES

Conventional wisdom -- if not folklore -- places elderly persons as more attuned to newspapers and other print media than younger adults. Explanations for this include their having been socialized into mass media before television appeared, and thus having developed more of a basic affinity to newspapers as information sources. Moreover, their greater leisure time presumably allows more attention to media, including newspapers. While countless proprietary local and national readership and marketing studies note greater newspaper readership among the aged, remarkably few published works have attempted to document and interpret such patterns in detail. Most of those have been hindered by small, atypical samples.

What has been fairly well determined is that adults 65 and over do spend more time with newspapers (ANPA, 1973; Chaffee and Wilson, 1975; Doolittle, 1979; Burgoon and Burgoon, 1980; NAB, 1981; O'Keefe and Reid, 1988), with most estimates running about 45 minutes a day. However, there are also indications that readership drops quite sharply during the mid to late 70s, likely a result of vision problems (Chaffee and Wilson, 1975; Doolittle, 1979; O'Keefe and Reid, 1987). The main reasons given for reading

tend to be for informational content and involvement in current affairs (Chaffee and Wilson, 1975; O'Keefe and Reid, 1987).

More recent national sample data indicate increased contact with neighbors as correlating with greater newspaper exposure (O'Keefe and Reid, 1989), lending some support to predictions of newspaper use and community ties formulations (cf. Jeffres et al., 1988; Stamm, 1985). However, organizational membership and length of residence were found unrelated to exposure; rather, the most salient predictors of such among the elderly appear to be being better educated, male, in good health, and unemployed. Aged persons in rural areas do not appear either exposed to or use newspapers or television in substantially different ways than their urban, and presumably more media-saturated, counterparts (O'Keefe, Burull, and Reid, 1990). Use of mass media in general for informational purposes appears best predicted by greater income and to a lesser extent education, more personal interaction with family and friends, and organizational involvement.

More extensive research has focused on television viewership among the aged, and once again they appear to spend more time in front of the set than do younger adults (Chaffee and Wilson, 1975; Harris, 1981; Rubin and Rubin, 1982; O'Keefe and Reid, 1988), although a sharp decline is found in the low to mid 80s (O'Keefe and Reid, 1987). Key motivations for using television

include information or involvement, as well as entertainment, companionship, and passing time (Rubin and Rubin, 1982; O'Keefe and Reid, 1987). Rubin and Rubin contend that such "contextual age" factors as health, social interaction, mobility and life satisfaction influence the seeking of gratifications from television. As for other media, radio may be gaining in favor due to new formats appealing to the elderly (Davis and Davis, 1985), although listenership is generally low. Declines have been reported in both magazine use (Harris, 1981) and book readership (McEnvoy and Vincent, 1980) among the aged.

Little attention has been given theoretically to the purposes newspapers serve for the elderly, or the interactions between readership and such factors as interpersonal relationships, community affiliations, health, psychological characteristics, or even basic demographics. As noted above, what work has been done has focused more on television (cf. Rubin, 1985; 1988), typically applying uses-gratifications perspectives (cf. Palmgreen, Wenner and Rosengren, 1985) of how that medium may or may not satisfy various needs through various exposure patterns and contexts. Indeed, this approach ties nicely with more activity-oriented models of social gerontology that give more concern to the social environment in which aging takes place, and that allow for greater personal choice and heterogeneity among the elderly (cf. Lawton, 1983; Passuth and Bengtson, 1988). In addition, age stratification models posit a range of status-related variables

that may be used to help explain media use variations (cf. Streib, 1985). In general, elderly persons may be posited as varying in the patterns of exposure to given media as functions of their (1) Demographic and other structural characteristics; (2) More immediate individual attributes, e.g. health, activity, sense of personal control; (3) Interpersonal interactions; and (4) Informational, entertainment, and socially-related personal needs.

In this context, the present study aims to investigate more extensively the uses of newspapers among the elderly, paying greater attention to differences among them and predictors of such. We focus in particular on aging itself as a key independent variable, following previous rationales (Chaffee and Wilson, O'Keefe and Reid) that behavioral changes, including media-related ones, do not cease at age 60 or 65. Rather, the life cycle continues over the increasing number of years adults have available to them. Specifically, we will examine: (1) the extent to which newspaper exposure and sought gratification patterns change over the years among elderly persons; and (2) what other factors are associated with such changes within different age groups.

METHODS

The data were generated from a larger study of crime prevention-related communication habits of the elderly (O'Keefe and Reid,

1988). As such, we face some limitations in doing secondary analysis of data gathered for other purposes. The original study entailed personal at-home interviews with a national probability sample of 1,308 persons age 60 and over. The Gallup Organization did the field work, using their standard replicated design modified for the U.S. elderly population.

We segmented the post-60 adults into three groups, based upon substantive as well as methodological (i.e., adequate sample size) considerations. The first group, 60-69, includes adults either on the onset of or in the early years of dealing with retirement (whether their own or a household member's), and the substantial changes in life that brings (n=670). The second, 70-79, bridges what for many are called the "golden years" of having adjusted to retired status and older age, with the beginnings of more risk of mental and physical impairment, widowhood, and related issues (n=469). The third segment, those 80 or over, includes the post-84 "oldest old," our fastest growing population segment chronologically (n=165). Disabilities and/or physical frailty are far more commonplace, as is living alone and/or dependence upon caretakers. Most are widowed, and income and education levels are apt to be substantially lower (Longino, 1986).

Newspaper exposure was measured by a "time spent with on an average weekday" item, and gratifications sought from newspapers

were described as "reasons for reading newspapers." (Item wordings are appended.) Gratifications assessed included general information gain, product information gain, involvement, conversation value, entertainment, companionship, relaxation-escapism, arousal, and time passing.

Demographic measures included gender, eduction, income, employment, and population density of the community. Also ascertained were perceived physical health, activity level, trust in other people, sense of control over one's life, and sense of fatalism. Interpersonal interaction variables used were number of persons in the household, level of contact with family and friends, and interaction with neighbors. Community-centered measures were organizational membership, length of residence, and satisfaction with one's neighborhood.

RESULTS

The overall profile of the elderly by age segments is much as expected from previous work (Table 1). The proportion of women in the population increases with age, while education, income and employment decrease. More of those 80+ are likely to live in less populated areas. Health and level of activity decline also, as does sense of control. Trust in other people, however, rises somewhat. It's especially important to note that while presence of other adults in the household declines sharply with age, contact with family, friends and neighbors does not.

Organizational membership remains quite constant, as does satisfaction with one's neighborhood.

Time spent with newspapers averaged about 47 minutes a day for persons between 60 and 79, but dropped by nearly 10 percent for those older (Table 2). Increasing vision problems may account for some of this.

As in other age cohorts, involvement and information gain are the most sought-after gratifications from newspapers by the elderly as a whole (Table 2). In general, however, the relevance of nearly all of the gratifications declines from the 60s to the 80-plus segment. Significant declines were found for information gain and arousal. An exception is companionship, which increased slightly with age.

The relationship between gratifications and exposure is examined in a different context through hierarchical regression analyses that control respectively for demographics and personal, interpersonal, and community attributes (Table 3). While the findings are somewhat scattered with few reaching significance, some trends note mention. One is that despite an overall lack of statistical significance due in part to the smaller sample size, the standardized regression coefficients for gratifications in the 80+ group are generally more substantial than those for the younger age ranges.

Information gain is the most marked example: It is significantly associated with exposure time only among persons 80 and over. Five other gratifications (involvement, conversation value, entertainment, companionship, and relaxation) invoke strong beta values of .12 or .13. Only involvement and companionship have similar values for the 60-69 cohort, and only involvement and time passing for those 70-79. One suggestion is that gratifications become more closely tied to exposure for the older old: to the extent that they take the time and/or go to the effort to read, their behavior is more purposive. This may be particularly true when they have a need for specific kinds of information. They may be more involved in the readership exercise as a result, possibly getting more out of it. Readership declines considerably with income with increased age, while gender and educational differences are virtually eliminated. Health and activity levels are predictive of readership only among the younger old. Neighborhood satisfaction emerges as a significant indicator of exposure for those 80+.

Regression equations for a two-factor representation of the gratifications (entertainment vs. information) really don't add much, except perhaps that gender, education and fatalism are more salient predictors of gratifications only within the 60-69 group (Table 4). Thus gratifications sought from newspapers appear relatively heterogeneous within the age segments, and

particularly for persons 70 and over. (The two factors, labeled entertainment and information, emerged from an iterated principal factor analysis carried out across the nine items. Oblique rotation using the SAS Factor Promax sequence followed, with the two factor sequence chosen based on eigen values, scree test and factor parsimony. The inter-factor correlation was .24. Standardized scoring coefficients for the entertainment factor included entertainment = .24; time passing = .31; companionship = .32; and escapism = .27. For the information factor, involvement = .42; information gain = .43; product information = .28; conversation = .19; and arousal = .18.)

DISCUSSION

Newspaper readership tends to vary less by demographic and personal factors among the older old. Exposure also declines declines somewhat within that age group, and gratifications sought from newspapers appear less pertinent. Nonetheless, certain gratifications -- especially information-relevant ones -- become more closely tied to readership. This suggests that to the extent newspapers are read by those in their 80s and older, the behavior is more motivated and perhaps more selective. Readership may be more confined to looking for items of particular interest, such as those related to health issues, insurance and benefit programs, etc.

Those now over 80 reached adulthood in the early 1900s, before

newspapers reached their levels of mass appeal -- especially in the dominant rural areas of the country. Those were also times of less schooling (in intensity if not in years put in), and longer work hours. Thus the newspaper might not have played as much of a role in the early lives of this age group as for those growing up in the later 1920s and 1930s, diminishing its current relevance. Previous research has assumed that vision problems account for much of the decline in readership in later years. However, less efficient reading habits brought about by early schooling experiences may also contribute to that. These possibilities can be partially tested by continuing to examine newspaper usage in successive cohorts as they reach their 80s.

The current post-60 generation is also one beset by more change, and more options, than their predecessors, resulting in more of a need for information simply to keep up. Newspapers likely have a significant role to play here, as is evidenced by the appearance of columns and pages devoted to "senior-related" issues including government benefits, pension dispositions, custodial care options, and the like. Modifications in federal, state and local government policies and regulations alone call for regular monitoring of media and other information sources by concerned elderly, and information specialists often rely on newspapers as a major dissemination channel.

A key limitation in this study is the reliance on "time spent

with" alone as a measure of exposure or readership. It's content free, and equally important says nothing about the volume of material being processed in a given time period. For example, content absorbed may be considerably lower among many in their 80s and 90s due to information processing abilities and skills, vision notwithstanding. The finding that various segments of the elderly seek information and involvement from newspapers does not necessarily mean that they are getting the same.

Recent research on news story recall comparing elderly persons to others indicates both memory and learning deficits from print media, mainly resulting from encoding patterns (Cole and Houston, 1987; John and Cole, 1986). Aged persons appeared to have more difficulty processing more semantically complex information as well. Moreover, they were not as adept at processing the information in video form as younger persons, likely due in part to less learning experience with that medium. These kinds of factors need to be more taken into account as journalistic and other informational messages are prepared for elderly audiences. Vision problems may be being accommodated more and more by offering large print versions, and by audiocassettes and computer-generated information formats. However, information processing difficulties make for more demanding strategies to effectively reach this audience.

More entertainment-oriented and social inputs of newspapers in

the lives of the elderly need more attention as well. Life-span views of socialization would put newspapers in the perspective of assisting to continually socialize older persons into new roles and situations, including such challenging ones as retirement, widowhood, relocation, and reduction of independence. Salient media functions more particular to the elderly may well be being overlooked. One such example is reminiscing, which Tamir (1984) argues can be a satisfying, adaptive behavior important to maintaining self concept and sense of competency.

The entry of greater numbers of adults into their elder years in the near future calls for more constant tracking of changing uses of newspapers and other media by them. Differences which might be particularly attended to include whether the majority "baby boom" generation increases its attentiveness to newspapers with age. Changes in newspaper content and formats will continue, and the ability of those entering elderhood to adapt to those should be closely examined. In addition to taking into account the over-time changes occurring among elderly people generally and within various segments of that group, the variability across the adults in it needs to be continuously addressed.

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TABLE 1

MEAN SCORES FOR GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ELDERLY

	Age		
	60-69 (n=670)	70-79 (n=469)	80+ (n=165)
Demographics			
Gender (0=male)	1.52	1.57	1.60a
Education	2.76	2.46	2.39c
Income	1.94	1.61	1.55c
Employment	1.34	1.13	1.09c
Polulation density	2.29	2.28	2.52c
Personal			
Health	3.83	3.66	3.31c
Activity	2.03	1.97	1.93b
Fatalism	1.98	2.05	1.96
Trust	1.97	2.03	2.31b
Sense of control	2.49	2.35	2.04c
Interpersonal			
Family/friend contact	2.06	2.02	1.98
Neighborhood contact	1.52	1.53	1.56
Adults in household	2.01	1.71	1.62c
Community			
Organizational membership	1.92	1.90	1.87
Length of residence	3.42	3.49	3.58
Neighborhood satisfaction	2.71	2.76	2.77

a=p<.05; b=p<.01; c=p<.001

TABLE 2

NEWSPAPER EXPOSURE AND GRATIFICATIONS BY AGE

	Age		
	60-69 (n=670)	70-79 (n=469)	80+ (n=165)
NP Exposure (min. per day)	46.52	47.23	42.60
NP Gratifications			
Involvement	2.35	2.34	2.24
Information gain	2.25	2.24	2.02b
Product information	1.69	1.70	1.61
Conversation value	1.75	1.78	1.64
Entertainment	1.72	1.79	1.70
Companionship	1.62	1.71	1.68
Relaxation/Escapism	1.62	1.68	1.56
Arousal	1.83	1.79	1.62b
Time passing	1.74	1.83	1.73

a=p<.05; b=p<.01; c=p<.001

TABLE 3

REGRESSION ANALYSES FOR NEWSPAPER EXPOSURE, BY AGE

	Age		
	60-69 (n=670)	70-79 (n=469)	80+ (n=165)
Demographics			
Gender (0=male)	-.11c	-.05	-.01
Education	.10a	.07	-.01
Income	-.02	-.14b	-.21b
Employment	.10a	-.03	-.04
Population density	-.00	-.12	-.01
Personal			
Health	.12b	.00	.10
Activity	-.10a	-.05	.07
Fatalism	.01	-.12a	-.05
Trust	-.03	-.01	-.02
Sense of control	-.01	.07	.03
Interpersonal			
Family/friend contact	-.05	-.03	-.08
Neighborhood contact	-.02	-.03	-.05
Adults in household	.01	.01	.03
Community			
Organizational membership	-.03	.02	-.06
Length of residence	.00	.01	-.15a
Neighborhood satisfaction	-.03	.03	.23c
Gratifications			
Involvement	.18c	.11a	.13
Information gain	.06	.09	.39c
Product information	.05	-.02	-.02
Conversation value	.00	.04	.13
Entertainment	.03	.04	.13
Companionship	.13b	-.04	.13
Relaxation/escapism	.01	.08	.12
Arousal	.07	.01	.06
Time passing	-.06	.16b	.02
(R-square)	(.15)	(.16)	(.38)

a=p<.05; b=p<.01; c=p<.001

TABLE 4

REGRESSION ANALYSES OF NEWSPAPER GRATIFICATIONS, BY AGE

	Entertainment			Information		
	Age			Age		
	60-69 (n=670)	70-79 (n=469)	80+ (n=165)	60-69 (n=670)	70-79 (n=469)	80+ (n=165)
Demographics						
Gender (0=male)	-.11b	.00	-.06	-.07	.00	-.19
Education	-.01	-.07	-.06	.11a	-.04	.05
Income	.01	.04	-.14	.04	.14a	-.03
Employment	.07	.03	.02	.02	.02	.16
Population density	.06	.04	.09	-.03	.02	.20a
Personal						
Health	-.08	-.04	-.05	.01	-.01	.06
Activity	.02	.01	-.10	.02	.00	.11
Fatalism	.09a	.06	.08	-.10a	.07	.02
Trust	.00	-.05	.04	-.02	.03	.05
Sense of control	.14	.07	.15	.00	.12a	-.02
Interpersonal						
Family/friend contact	.06	.05	.11	.07	.12a	.06
Neighborhood contact	-.03	-.06	-.02	.00	.07	.00
Adults in household	-.03	.07	-.17	.01	.03	-.08
Community						
Organizational membership	-.06	-.07	-.04	.05	.06	.11
Length of residence	.05	-.02	.06	.00	-.03	-.03
Neighborhood satisfaction	-.05	-.05	-.13	.02	.08	-.08
(R-square)	(.09)	(.06)	(.13)	(.06)	(.06)	(.13)

APPENDIX: MEASURES

Media Exposure

"Approximately how many hours do you spend watching television on the average weekday? Just give your best estimate." (Indexed to three levels)
"Approximately how many minutes do you spend looking at a newspaper on an average weekday? Just give your best estimate." (Indexed to three levels)

Media Gratifications

"Now I will read a list of reasons people sometimes give for watching television and reading newspapers...as I read each reason, please tell me how much it applies to you--a great deal, somewhat or hardly at all."
(1) Involvement: "To feel more involved about what's going on in the world" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 2.33; TV $\bar{x}$ = 2.40);
(2) Information gain: "To learn about things that might be useful to me" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 2.22; TV $\bar{x}$ = 2.19);
(3) Product information: "To learn about products to buy or use" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 1.68; TV $\bar{x}$ = 1.51);
(4) Companionship: "To keep me company" (NP x = 2.11; TV x = 2.12);
(5) Conversation value: "To have something to talk to friends about" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 1.75; TV $\bar{x}$ = 1.78);
(6) Entertainment: "To be entertained" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 1.74; TV $\bar{x}$ = 2.42);
(7) Arousal: "To watch or read about something exciting" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 1.79; TV $\bar{x}$ = 1.98);
(8) Relaxation/escape: "To help me relax and forget about problems" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 1.63; TV $\bar{x}$ = 2.03);
(9) Time passing: "To help pass the time" (NP $\bar{x}$ = 1.77; TV $\bar{x}$ = 2.13); and
(10) Time structuring (for television only): "To plan and schedule my day around" (TV $\bar{x}$ = 1.39).

Number of Adults in Household

"How many persons 18 years of age and over are living in this household, including yourself? Include lodgers, companions, servants or other employees living in this household." (Indexed to three levels)

Organizational Membership

"Altogether, how many clubs, organizations or church groups, if any, are you currently active in?" (Indexed to three levels)

Family/Friend Contact

"Would you say that you have enough personal contact with family

and friends, more than enough, or not enough?"

Neighborhood Contact

"Do you know your closest neighbors well enough to talk to them?"
"Do you know any other people in your neighborhood well enough to talk to them?"
"All in all, is this the kind of neighborhood where people seem to go their own way, or is it the kind of neighborhood where people really seem to be concerned about each other?"
(Summed into three-level index)

Physical Health

"On this card are some ways in which people describe their health. Please read me the letter that best matches yourself in terms of general health: (a) Almost never interferes; (b) Seldom interferes; (c) Occasionally interferes; (d) Very often interferes; (e) Almost always interferes."

Fatalism

"I'm going to read you some statements with which you may agree or disagree. From this card, please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each statement (on five-point scale):
(1) In spite of what some people say, the life of the average person is getting worse;
(2) These days a person doesn't really know who can be counted on;
(3) There is not much use in trying to protect yourself against crime these days--if criminals want you, they'll get you."
(Summed into three-level index; Cronbach's alpha = .74)